

# The Washington Post

## *The Real Leadership Test*

**T**HE THREE-WAY race to replace Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) as majority leader, which comes before House Republicans for a vote today, has featured a lot of talk about lobbying and earmark reform. That's great; we support both. But there hasn't been enough focus on another kind of reform that the new leader, whoever he is, needs to promote: making the operations of the House less autocratic, more deliberative for all members and fairer to the minority — in short, more democratic.

There is an inevitable tendency for whoever controls the House to use majority muscle to hustle legislation to the floor and get it through with as little debate as possible. For years before the 1994 GOP takeover of the House, Republicans complained mightily of this mistreatment at the hands of Democrats. In the past decade they have proved unable to resist such tactics themselves; indeed, they've expanded on them.

Legislation that emerges from committees is often changed in the House Rules Committee, which then issues a closed rule that doesn't permit amendments on the House floor. Mammoth spending bills and other complicated measures are unveiled just hours — if that long — before a scheduled vote, meaning that no one can know what he or she is voting on.

Votes are held open long after the scheduled time is up so that majority whips can twist arms (and dangle — or withhold — earmarks and

other benefits), as with the Medicare prescription drug bill. Provisions are added in conference committee without being in either the House or Senate versions. Worse: At the end of the past session of Congress, substantive new language on liability for vaccine manufacturers magically appeared in the defense spending bill *after* conferees had approved what they thought was the final package.

This kind of behavior demeans the legislative process. A quartet of Democratic members of Congress — Reps. David R. Obey (Wis.), Barney Frank (Mass.), David E. Price (N.C.) and Tom Allen (Maine) — have proposed a thoughtful set of procedural reforms that would curtail the abuses. It's telling both that the Democrats didn't try to solicit Republican backing before unveiling their proposal and that hardly any has been forthcoming.

There has been some talk, but not enough, among the candidates for leader about making changes in this process; not surprisingly, little of it focuses on the mistreatment of the minority about which Republicans wailed so loudly when it was happening to them. For the good of the House, and of the country, whoever is elected today must work — and Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (Ill.) must join in — to ensure that the members who elect them aren't treated as rubber stamps, and that those in the other party aren't dismissed as irrelevant inconveniences.